Managing Stress During Emergency Response

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Self-Care and Psychosocial Preparedness

Emerged from:

- Southern Alberta floods and wildfires

- Recognized need for more focus on responder self-care

Alberta Health Services (AHS) partnered with Dr. Patricia Watson and conducted interviews with affected community staff and leaders across Alberta.

Psychosocial Preparedness

- Disaster and emergency response work carries potential impacts for your well-being; self-care will be a natural need

- We become a better responder for our family and community when we pay attention to our own self-care

- Recognizing your signs of stress and making self-care a part of your regular routines, individually, in your teams, and your organizations can help to sustain you in your response work
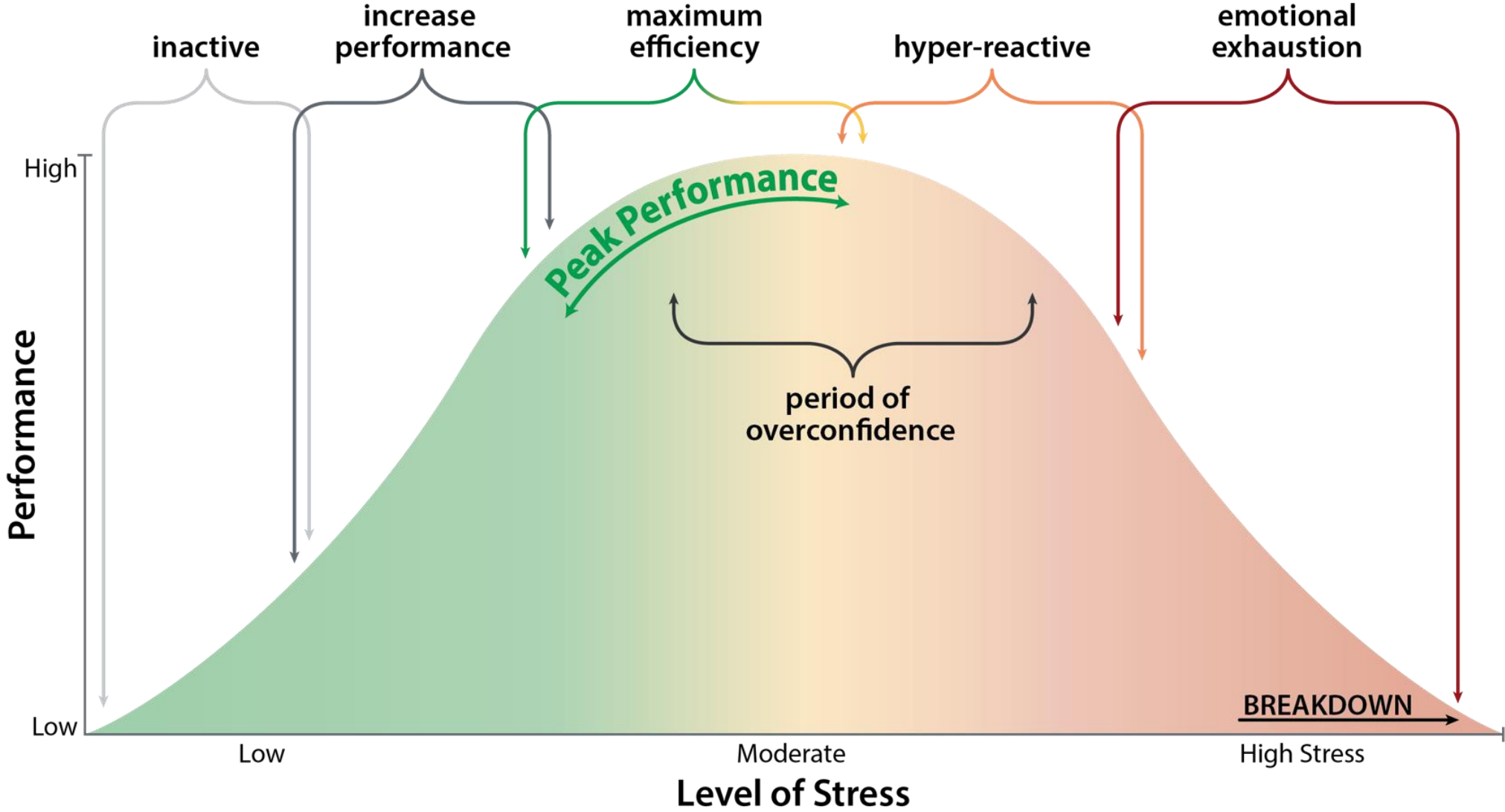
Positives of Response & Recovery Work

- Disaster/Emergency response can lead to:

  - A sense of strength, confidence, connectedness, contribution, meaning, and respect for human resilience

- Serving others may be:

  - Rewarding, satisfying, and may provide a wealth of personal skills such as coping skills and problem-solving

- It may remind us to consider what's important in our lives

Challenges of Response & Recovery Work

- Severity or duration of the event

- Your own family may be impacted

- Heightened sense of responsibility to others causes self neglect

- Self-imposed time pressure to react; an internal need to hurry

- Long hours for an extended period

- Getting too involved emotionally with affected individuals

- Intra-agency or interpersonal conflicts

Human Performance and Stress

inactive · increase performance · maximum efficiency · hyper-reactive · emotional exhaustion

Peak Performance

period of overconfidence

BREAKDOWN

High · Low — Performance

Low · Moderate · High Stress — Level of Stress

Adapted from: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2017) ; Diamond, D. M., et al. (2007) ; Swank, R.L., & Marchand. W.E. (1946) ; Watkins. A. (1997).

Long-term Response & Recovery Stress

- Sometimes the effects of the stress are masked

- Responder stress goes unnoticed until well into or after the event

- Responders will often not realize the impact until they:

  - develop a medical problem

  - take time off and then realize the contrast between stress levels before and after their time off

- Due to the stressful impacts for the entire organization, senior leadership may not receive or have opportunity to seek feedback until the problems are more serious

Long-term Response & Recovery Stress

Burnout: Gradual wearing down; emotional & physical exhaustion due to external work and personal stressors (disrupted support network, high workload demands, and limited resources)

- sadness, apathy, cynicism, feeling discouraged, irritability

Compassion Stress/Fatigue: Stress and wearing effects of helping or wanting to help impacted individuals (effects of the difficult and extensive work that needs to get done)

- helplessness, frustration, self-isolation, physiological & emotional exhaustion

Long-term Response & Recovery Stress

Secondary/Vicarious Traumatic Stress: Cumulative stress reactions over time due to supporting multiple disaster survivors

- avoidance/detachment or over-involvement, and may include PTSD-like symptoms; symptoms may appear similar to the survivors they are supporting

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

- intrusive symptoms (e.g., nightmares, flashbacks), numbing, anxiety and/or depression

Self-Care Red Flags

- Change in eating habits or weight

- Loss of interest

- Guilt

- Drinking, smoking, or vaping more

- Conflict in relationships

- Changes in sleep

- Don't give self a break

- Isolating self

- Feeling very busy or hurried

- Physical changes

- Memory or attention problems

Awareness: Stress Continuum Model

Pre-Disaster	Reacting	Distressed	Mental Health Problems
Definition: usual functioning when not experiencing the adverse effects of stress	**Definition:** common & reversible distress, stress managed with self-care and natural supports	**Definition:** severe & persistent functional impairment, harder to manage stress symptoms	**Definition:** severe functional impairment, unable to manage stress, potential diagnosed mental illness/ disorder
Features: • Normal fluctuations in mood • Normal sleep patterns • Physically well • Socially active	**Contributing factors:** any stressors **Features:** • Tired/low energy, muscle tension, headaches • Confusion, disorientation • Trouble sleeping, irritability • Decreased social activity	**Contributing factors:** life threat, loss, moral injury, caregiver burden **Features:** • Excessive guilt, shame, or blame • Excessive anxiety, anger, sadness, hopelessness • Restless or disturbed sleep • Fatigue, aches & pains • Social avoidance or withdrawal	**Contributing factors:** pre-existing mental illness or substance use problem, burnout, secondary traumatic stress **Features:** • Social or occupational impairment • Depression & anxiety • Harmful use of alcohol or other drugs • Self-harming behaviours or thoughts of harm to others • Suicidal thoughts

Listening to Ourselves

Self-awareness is our starting point for self-care.

- We may do this on our own, or with our team, organization and/or support system

- Strategies may include:
  - Formal or deliberate self-assessment
  - Personal & organizational checklists
  - Using technology apps
  - Routine check-ins
  - Accepting help & support from others
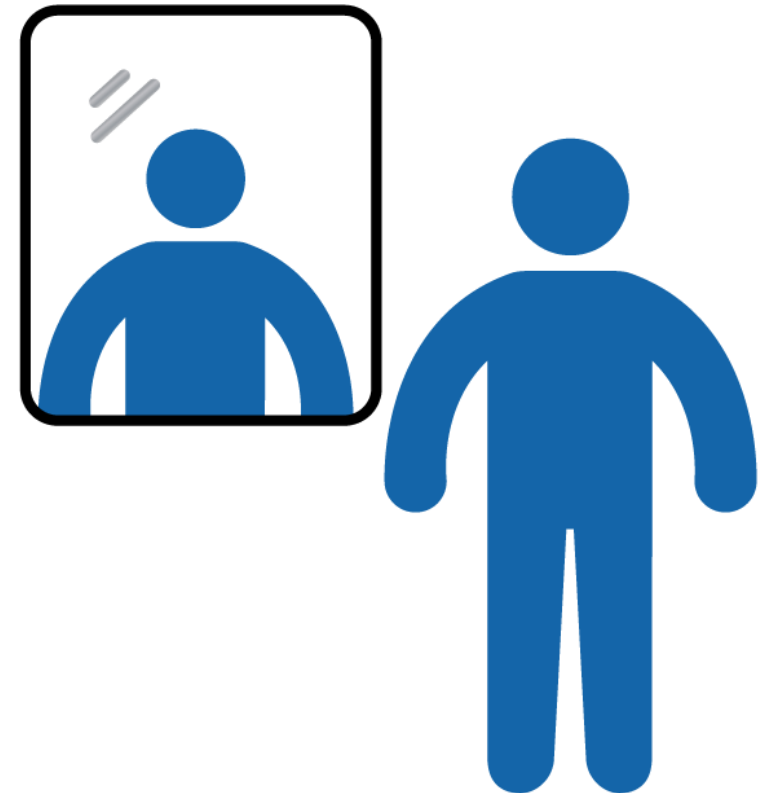
Before Responding to a Disaster

Questions to ask yourself:

- What's going on in my personal life right now?

- Do I have personal or family commitments that would be affected if I was redeployed?

- How is my current physical, emotional, mental, and overall well-being?

WHEN YOU SAY 'YES' TO OTHERS, MAKE SURE YOU'RE NOT SAYING 'NO' TO YOURSELF.

Self Check-Ins

Self Check-in Ahead

- Have you considered checking in with yourself?

- What is helpful to you?

- What makes it difficult to do?

What Works?

Personal

- Self-awareness: knowing your personal warning signs of stress
- Having diverse strategies that work for you
- Being flexible with the learning curve and demands of disaster response & recovery work
- Structuring self-care into your personal routine

Organizational

- Avoiding a one-size-fits all approach
- Build adaptable strategies from within, with staff input
- Modeling self-care individually and structurally at a leadership level
- Check-in, Check-in, Check-in! At all levels of the organization

Physical Strategies

- Strategies important to our overall health and well-being, which can contribute to reduced stress reactions:

  - Controlled breathing

  - Daily physical activity

  - Healthy eating

  - Sleep management

  - Time outside

  - Simple activities like stretching
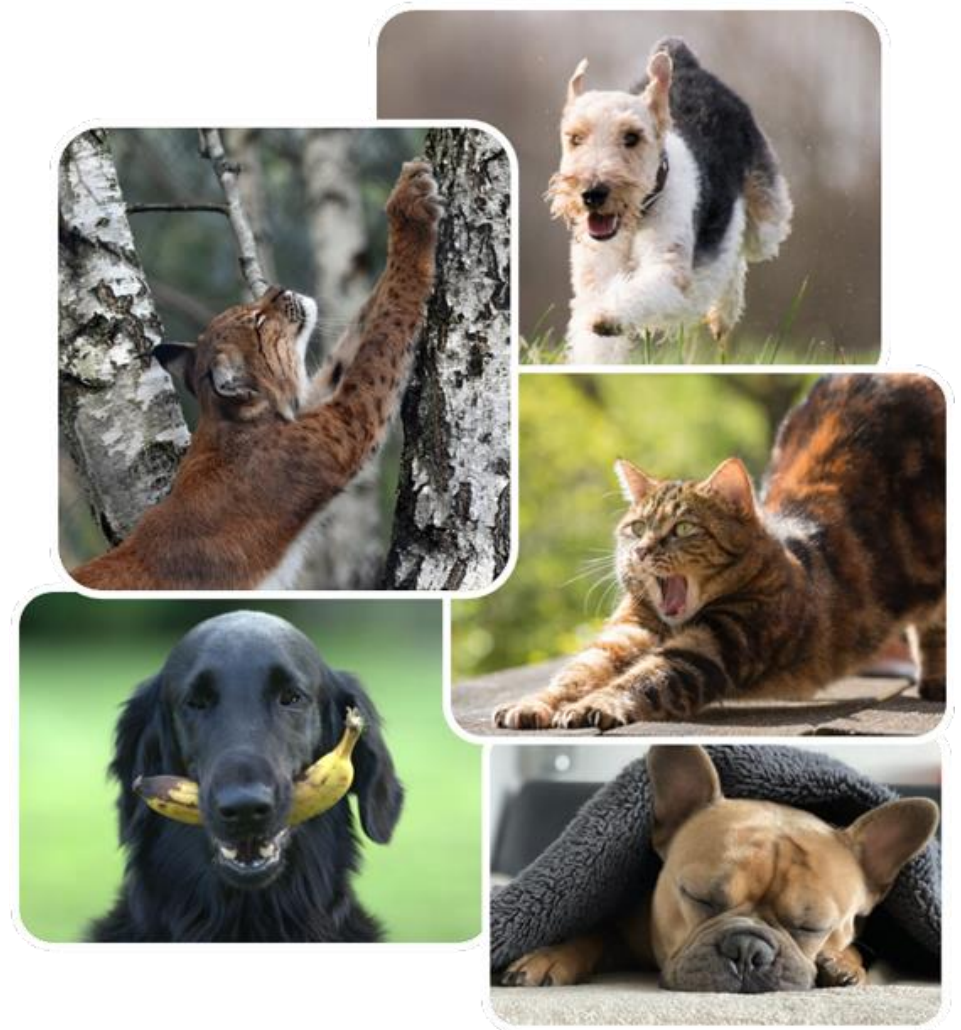
Cognitive Strategies

Increase:

Positive emotion-focused strategies:

- Humor (appropriate)

- Acceptance

- Pay attention to your self talk

- Taking time out for yourself each day

- Gratitude practice (for work and home)

- Mindfulness practices

Learn to laugh at yourself, you'll never stop being amused.

Social Strategies

- Seek out contact with and foster a network of family, friends, and colleagues who understand and support you, even if distant

- Be open to different types of support from different people (it might come to you from people & places you hadn't expected)

- Help others

- Maintain routine in daily life and social activities

- Have a trusted person who can watch for and notice changes in you

- Utilize coworker support, access mentors, or seek your own therapy

Work Focused Strategies

Occupational-focused coping strategies:

- Planning ahead
- Maintaining work balance with family and leisure activities
- Maintaining professional identity, values, and boundaries
- Seeking out additional training
- Positive and gratitude-oriented feedback

Self-Care Barriers

- Levels of exhaustion in post-disaster work

- Considering self-care a luxury or indulgence

- Lack of awareness about self-care needs

- Being hard on self (e.g., "I shouldn't need a break.")

- Denial (e.g., "I'm fine.", "I don't need it.")

- Cultural value of over-work or working hard

- High workload demands; limited resources (e.g., staffing, funding, isolation)

Special thanks and credit for Self-Care content